DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 052 181 TE 002 441

AUTHOR	Frogner, Ellen A.
TITLE	Language Attitudes and Teacher Education.
PUB DATE	Nov 70
NOTE	16p.; Speech given at the Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English (60th, Atlanta, November 1970)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Concept Teaching, *English Instruction, *Language Usage, *Secondary School Students, *Student Motivation, *Teacher Education

ABSTRACT

The language attitudes of a brand new English teacher are narrated, and the responsibility of a college English department in preparing teachers is discussed. Attitudes toward language and language teaching are shaped through information, personal experience, observations, formal and informal comments by those who have prestige to the reader or listener. A study conducted by use of a 100-item Language Inquiry, comparing responses of several groups of English majors (recent graduates, college seniors, and English teachers in junior and senior high schools) with responses of linguists showed that the teachers were closer to the responses of the linguists than were any of the other groups. Teacher education curricula for prospective English teachers should be reevaluated constantly as to what language background is required by the secondary school teacher. (CK)

ED052181

LANGUAGE ATTITUDES AND TEACHER EDUCATION

Ellen A. Frogner

For part of the time, I shall ask you to assume that Thomasin is speaking. Thomasin is a new college graduate, an English major who is seriously concerned about the responsibilities of her first teaching position. After two months' time, she realizes that she now represents English to about 125 young people in her ninth and eleventh grade classes.

Why a concentration on Thomasin (it could as well be Thomas) in considering the topic of language attitudes and teacher education? I shall answer the question by using this quotation from Dante Gabriel Rossetti:

"A sail, spark-white upon the space of sea,
Can pin a whole horizon into place."

The plan of attack sounds ambitious, but if the whole horizon is not pinned into place, then at least the attitudes that a brand new English teacher expresses in relation to language may lead to some questions: Have I ever met a Thomasin? Is she typical? Would I want her to be? Or do I sincerely hope that there is only one Thomasin in the professional world and that there are no Thomases?

But first we need to listen to this new English teacher. What are her attitudes toward language? Toward the English language with which she has grown up, as have also most of her 14 and 16 year old students? How does she feel toward these students as users of language? How does she feel toward teaching?

We come upon Thomasin just as she has finished going through the October issue of the Reader's Digest. One of the experienced teachers has told her that the section "Quotable Quotes" is often a good source of topics for class themes:

TE 002 441

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Dr. Ellen A. Frogner

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION.

"Maybe it is. I have never tried it, but aren't the ideas hard to come to cold? I see a quotation here, though, that sets me to wondering what my own ideas are: 'The greatest educational dogma is also its greatest fallacy: the belief that what must be learned can necessarily be taught.' [Sydney J. Harris in "Quotable Quotes," Reader's Digest (October 1970) 24]

"I am not sure how Sydney J. Harris is using the word taught, and so I can't say exactly how I feel about his statement. It strikes me that his idea of teaching may be narrow. A few months ago I would have passed the whole thing by, but now I wonder about such words as taught and teaching. What do people have in mind?

"I remember one of my English teachers saying that the best methods in teaching language are the intangible ones. I've noticed that history and science teachers find it hard to understand what goes on in a good composition class. Art teachers come closer. Now that I have taught a little while, I can see the point better than I did. A person's language is part of him, and teaching is a matter of helping the student develop in respect to language. That puts the main emphasis on the individual-using-language. For one thing, it seems logical to do this, and for another thing, it is poor psychology to play down or ignore something that means as much to an individual as his own language.

"I wonder if this profession that I am now in has ever really solidly tried to meet the criticism of those who feel left outside as far as English goes. You have met it, I'm sure -- the quizzical smile, the tolerant stare. I haven't encountered the disdainful shrug yet and hope I won't.

"John, a pre-med I met when I was working at the hospital, is an example of how some people feel about English. He said that he couldn't see much sense in most of it. Did

he like to read when he was in high school? Yes -- loved it -- A Separate Peace, The Pearl, stories and novels by Hemingway, and Conrad especially. But some of those early English writers? Oh, no. Spenser, Addison, Lamb -- and John? I agree -- oh, no. The Contemporary Literature and Creative Writing classes were fine. In Creative Writing, he had a teacher who could read his compositions aloud in such a way that they had sounded pretty good, and he was proud to claim ownership. John is a great trapper and likes to write about the north woods. Through the encouragement of this Creative Writing teacher, he had one of his compositions published as an article in a nature magazine, and since then he has had two more published on his own. As for the grammar work in his regular English classes (whatever he meant by grammar), it was worse than the early English writers. He has not studied any languages other than English as yet, and he is not sure about ever making the grade. However, he grew up speaking Greek at home with his parents, who came from Greece, and now he would like to learn to read the language. John also had something to say about his most recent English class. He took Freshman English when he graduated from high school and went away to college, but as he found the course, in his words, 'the less said the better.'

"I have a notion that John's Creative Writing teacher put the main imphasis on the individual-using-language. I have a notion, too, that this emphasis is likely to be true of Creative Writing classes while in the regular English classes, the focus is more on the language as such. In fact, John did not consider Creative Writing to be English. I have found others who think the same way -- even English majors preparing to teach.

"This makes me remember something I would like to vote for in the preparation of English teachers -- much more understanding of the creative process, both through study and through

experience in writing. (And I don't mean by this a course aimed at students interested in being professional writers.) I also think that people who are going to teach high school English should appreciate how well children and adolescents express themselves creatively in language and how natural it seems to be for them to do this. My English Methods teacher had a hard time convincing us of the fact, but her illustrations finally brought some light. Maybe we hadn't given the subject much thought and also, by the time a person is a college senior he may have heard too many negative comments about the language of young people to have faith left.

"If I am going to place my emphasis on the individual-using- language, then I will need to know much more than I do now about the process of writing and also about the language itself and the individuals who use it. How did I acquire this zeal to teach the hard way -- hard in one sense but easier in another?

"As I look back on my student teaching last spring, there was one experience that set me thinking more than any other. I asked my ninth grade students to write down the thoughts of a character from one of the short stories that they had read. The situation could be a new one (though in keeping with the character chosen), or it could come directly from a story. The ninth graders really dug into the assignment.

"Up to this point everyone seemed happy, but now the fog drifted in. Analysis of the writing led to dismay. One sentence fragment after another! That is, they were fragments according to the way the students, the room teacher, and I had been taught. I felt like a heel giving such low grades for all the <u>frag's</u>, but the English Department considered the ninth grade an especially strategic time to come down heavily on this 'error.' The student could raise his

grade somewhat by rewriting his entire composition, 'correcting' the sentence fragments. It was suggested that I might like to soften the effect of the low grade by complimenting the student on content and by using his first name in my written comments (to give the personal, interested touch, I suppose, but does it compensate for infringements on the attitudes and confidence of the individual-using-language?).

"The whole thing seemed wrong. I did some thinking and reading and came to a number of conclusions. The ninth graders were writing down the thoughts of a character. They were doing so in a natural and realistic way and in an accepted form for this kind of situation. Instead of using the rigid error-conscious approach, I might have led my students to understand that there is more than one way for a composition to develop. Here -- in their writing this time -- the natural development was according to the association of thoughts or details. Another time -- in another kind of writing -- the development might be ordered by a controlling idea. If I had only recognized these differences, I could have been working with the individual-using-language. Instead of spreading a pall over a language situation, I could have made the whole thing really worthwhile for the students. And the individual's use of language would have been respected. This point about respect for another's language comes up in discussions of regional and social dialects -- but isn't it something to think about at all times?

"From the experience, I also came to a better understanding of how literature and language can contribute to each other. I became more conscious of the kinds of situations in which authors use minor sentence types. Next semester I'll be teaching A Tale of Two Cities and I've been rereading the book. I have noticed how Dickens uses sentences other than the subject-predicate type in scenes where there is tension and strong emotion -- the gathering of forces in Saint Antoine,

the storming of the Bastille, the reading of a strategic document, a vote leading to a condemnation to death, the escape by carriage out into the open country.

"And so a writer has resources available that he can use in order to accomplish a certain purpose. What purpose? In the answer to this question, literature and language come together, but 'what purpose' throws the emphasis on content first and that is where it should be. I am afraid that I am beginning to sound like my English Methods teacher. I didn't think that I ever would.

"Katherine Mansfield is another good author to use in illustrating how a minor sentence type can serve a purpose or create a certain effect. I wonder why her story 'The Wind Blows' isn't included more often in books for high school students rather than two or three of her others that are easier to find. It expresses so well the tumult in the emotions of a young girl. [Katherine Mansfield, Bliss and Other Stories (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920)] Katherine Mansfield is one of my favorite authors, although I can see that high school students might not always feel as I do. The wind in this story evidently symbolizes tumult, restlessness, rebellion, but the difference in the degree of separation from the home or the finality of the separation is suggested by the use of the comma at the beginning ('The wind, the wind') and the dash at the end ('The wind -- the wind').

So even punctuation can be taught as a resource that a writer has available. Maybe I can get across to students that back of what they read is a writer. Here teachers have stressed biographical details, but I would rather stress a human being at work, sometimes making choices consciously, intentionally, and other times going ahead as if the material were in control and shaped the expression. Who knows for sure always which it is? Anyway good writing does not come all neatly packaged. It comes as the result of the efforts of an individual, but I wonder if this is the impression

that is often enough left with high school students -- or with college students preparing to teach English.

"I have been going on at length about something that happened to me as a student teacher and on what grew out of it. The experience was a significant one for me and contributed to shaping some of the attitudes I have about teaching [redacted] language.

"Perhaps I should explain that while I believe teachers should not ride roughshod over the language of their students, this does not mean that just anything goes. Of course there is a strong subject-verb pattern in English, but other kinds of sentences have a place and should be respected. Why not capitalize on the fact that comparison and contrast add interest and heighten learning? As language was taught to me -- in college too -- it all seemed so rigid, so inescapable and absolute. It was all one tone.

"I am finding that teaching language is like an art. It is hard to see how it can be done mechanically. I wish I knew more about how language works. I am aware that most children develop remarkably in language during the pre-school years. How does it happen? Nature and nurture, inner maturation, interaction between the child and his environment -- familiar terms of psychologists. Are there more applications to English teaching than is commonly thought? Listening seems to be accepted as important in language development (along with repetition), but isn't it the listening that the youngster does when he is concerned, interested, and involved that counts especially -- as also the kind of social and physical environment in the classroom and the response to this environment through using language, expressing relationships, experimenting, defining, organizing? Hard to pin down? Hard to test? Maybe I am getting into some of the intangibles, but more and more I find myself believing in the rightness of the comment that I mentioned awhile ago, made by one of my English teachers -- that the best methods

in teaching language are the intangible ones.

"I can see how reading becomes important in the student's development as a user of language. I have never taught Sheila Burnford's The Incredible Journey, but I borrowed it last year from my sister, who was in the seventh grade at the time, and I enjoyed reading about the three animals on their journey -- the old white English bull terrier, the young red-gold Labrador retriever, and the wheat-colored Siamese cat. Each animal has a distinct personality. The young Labrador is the leader, but at a personal sacrifice -- he has to manage to take the other two with him all the way. At the very end, though, the attention is not on the young leader. It is on the old terrier with his nautical roll and the Siamese cat, who came running at lightning speed so that the two could finish the incredible journey together. In all of this, there is the interest of following a struggle against obstacles, often a high-tension struggle and fierce fights.

"My sister said that she and her friends in the seventh grade liked the book very much. The content carries the reader along even when the sentence structure and vocabulary must be really challenging. This is a fortunate combination because when a reader participates in the events and scenes in the story, he is also participating in the language. Seeing to it that students have a chance to do this kind of reading is one of the intangible ways in which language is taught. But try to convince people! I remember with what finality I was handed the language textbook at the beginning of the term -- a 'here-it-is.'

"I have already learned the importance of using judgment in the teaching of language -- when not to take up certain details as well as when to take them up, with whom to take then up, and how much time one should spend on them. I believe that with most seventh graders it would be good to call attention to some of the sentence structure and word

choice in The Incredible Journey. Also, the content could stimulate the group writing of sentences -- or should I say generat~~e~~ing? Some of my junior and senior high school teachers used the method of having a class work out sentences together, either to help students see and hear different ways of expressing the same idea or to teach a term in grammar like infinitive or adjective clause. As I remember these English classes, we worked on getting the best sentences possible. Clear and effective were the watchwords. I am confused now by some of what I see in textbooks and in accounts that teachers write about their classes. To what extent should the methods of the linguist and the methods of the English teacher be parallel? Is there a confusion of aims within the English teaching profession?

"An English major friend of mine tells me that she is afraid to try having students compose sentences together. She says that she could never be sure about the language problems that might come up. I feel a little like that, but I dare my fate and use the method. I don't like to place all of the responsibility on the alma mater, but English majors should certainly have a solid and comprehensive background in language. I have discovered that one needs to know much about many details.

"Sometimes we are unsure of ourselves because we do not have enough background, and sometimes we are too sure for the very same reason, as I was when I marked all the frag's or as my friend was when she explained slow as the adjective form and slowly as the only adverbial form. Fortunately, another time both of us will be able to offer our students a richer experience because we have informed ourselves about the detail in language. I feel the same way about vocabulary. I want to add to the student's understanding of how words are formed and how they function and what relationships they have with humanity. I feel that I pass over golden opportunities to do this when material

is being listened to or read -- simply because I don't have enough background to know what to look for.

"However, with this desire to have my students experience language as something alive and energetic, I keep looking and listening for striking illustrations of language in action today." ----------Here Thomasin went on to describe her recent success in finding two companion selections from an area newspaper. One selection was a feature article and the other a letter to the editor. Both contained key-idea verbs that illustrate an old but still active process in the English language -- shun-piked and sputnik-panicked. Both selections contained argument, one through narration and description and the other, through the statement and arrangement of ideas. For Thomasin's eleventh grade students, the two selections taken together offered a range of interest in subject matter.

Is Thomasin a typical new graduate in a first position as a high school teacher of English? Would we want her to be?

We started with these questions. The answer to the second is a matter of personal conviction. For my part, I would like to meet many Thomasins in the profession. The answer to the other question (Is she a typical new graduate?) will be related to one's experience. My own tells me that she is only somewhat typical.

Not all of Thomasin's attitudes could be reflected within the time that she talked. Her interest in teaching is typical of new graduates, but her strong interest in language teaching may be unusual. When Thomasin says that she is insecure about many details involved in language, she shares a feeling with other new graduates. However, she may be more observing than is usual, and she may raise more questions. She demonstrates initiative, although she also adds her complaints to the familiar and often justifiable cry of English majors that the alma mater did not provide a comprehensive enough background for the teacher of language.

If I were to summarize the way in which Thomasin is not so typical, I would say that it is a more than usual awareness of language as being significant in the lives of her students. Thomasin favors the positive approach rather than the negative in both methods and materials. She is interested in how language works. She believes that teachers need to have faith in the intangible (but nonetheless direct) ways of teaching language. She also takes the attitude that English teachers have a definite responsibility to interpret current usage as accurately as possible. Through their observations of the English language and through a background of information, they should understand current usage in the light of broader relationships.

Attitudes toward language and language teaching are shaped in different ways -- through information, personal experience, observations, formal and informal comments by people who have prestige to the reader or listener. Everyone in a college English department shares in the serious responsibility of shaping the attitudes of prospective English teachers and so in turn, the classroom experiences that high school students will have with language.

When the opportunity was available through ISCPET (Illinois State-Wide Curriculum Study Center in the Preparation of Secondary School English Teachers), I was interested in studying the language attitudes of college students -- altogether 597 sophomores, juniors, seniors, and graduate students from institutions located in representative parts of Illinois. Of these, 447 were English majors. The next largest groups according to majors were Journalism (55) and Speech (44), leaving a miscellaneous group of 51. I also aimed to continue to study the English majors who, as seniors or graduate students, said that they intended to teach junior or senior high school English and who, after an interval of a year or more, were doing so. Of the possible 196 seniors and graduate students

in this follow-up, it was possible to locate and get responses from 83; of these, only 49 were teaching junior or senior high school English. An additional group included in the study consisted of 202 public school teachers who at the time were working with student teachers in English from the various Illinois colleges, or had done so in preceding years.

The responses of the several different groups were compared with the responses of ten outstanding linguists on a 100-item Language Inquiry that I developed, with the ten linguists contributing as consultants. [Illinois State-Wide Curriculum Study Center, Ellen A. Frogner, A Study of the Responses to the "Language Inquiry" (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois, 1969)]

The content of the Inquiry consists of statements related to a number of language topics: attitude toward language, composition writing, development in the use of language, dialects, dictionaries, grammatical forms, history of the English language, language study and teaching, pronunciation, punctuation, relationship between speaking and writing, relationship of English to other languages, spelling, standards in using language, structure of sentences, style, terminology, and vocabulary.

It is not the intention here to compare each of the attitudes expressed by Thomasin with the attitudes expressed in responses to the items. The content of the two sources is not parallel in every respect. However, there are some comparisons of interest where relationships in the content are close.

For instance, Thomasin was impressed by her experience with the frag's. In the Language Inquiry, the statement most closely related to the situation is this: Verbless sentences are frequently effective in descriptive writing. The ten linguists either agreed or moderately agreed with this statement. None disagreed and none indicated no opinion. ~~The percentages for the responses of the 270 college seniors~~

Of the 447 English majors, 55 percent (in round numbers) either agreed or moderately agreed, 34 percent disagreed, and 11 percent indicated no opinion. The percentages for the responses of the 270 college seniors (not quite all English majors) were almost the same (differing by one or two figures or not at all).

A higher percentage of the 83 recent graduates agreed or moderately agreed with the statement concerning the acceptability of verbless sentences. The percentage here is 67. Twenty-five percent disagreed and seven percent checked no opinion. The cooperating teachers voted a still higher percentage of agreement or moderate agreement with the statement in the Inquiry (73 percent). Nineteen percent disagreed, 5 percent indicated no opinion, and 3 percent omitted the item.

The results here parallel one of the general findings in the study: the responses of the cooperating teachers in the junior and senior high schools were closer to the responses of the linguists than was true of any of the other groups, although there still were a number of statistically significant differences. (These teachers were a select group. More than half had their Master's degree and five, a degree beyond the Master's. All were experienced teachers who had supervised student teachers.) Next in closeness of response to the linguists were the 83 recent graduates, English majors who as seniors or graduate students had indicated an intention to teach in the secondary schools.

Stated in statistical terms, comparisons of responses of the main groups in the study and responses of the linguists are like this: Out of the 100 items in the Language Inquiry, there were 12 differences at the .01 level of significance between responses of the linguists and responses of the cooperating teachers, 17 such differences between linguists and recent graduates, 27 between linguists and the entire college group (also between the linguists and college seniors), and 25 between linguists and English majors. (If an explanation of terms is in order, the .01 level of significance means that the observed difference is a true difference and is not due to chance.)

Thomasin brought up another matter of usage where results

from the Language Inquiry are of interest in the attitudes expressed. The statement in the Inquiry is this: The signs saying "Drive Slow" should be corrected to read "Drive Slowly." Each of the ten linguists disagreed with this statement. Respectively 35 and 33 percent of the English majors and college seniors disagreed, as did also 47 percent of the recent graduates and 55 percent of the cooperating teachers. When the results are looked at further, we see that 40 percent of the English majors and also 40 percent of the college seniors agreed or moderately agreed that "Drive Slow" should be corrected. About one-third in each group of the recent graduates and the cooperating teachers thought so too. Classroom practices may very well be reflected in this comment by a college student: "I know that the sign is incorrect grammatically -- it should read 'Drive Slowly!' I feel 'Drive Slow' is more effective on the sign."

The student's comment on the slow-slowly question and the results for this item in the Language Inquiry reflect what appears elsewhere in the findings -- a tendency on the part of the respondents to follow a traditional rule or a rigid classification. The situation may be indicative of the over-confidence to which Thomasin referred, or it may suggest a lack of confidence in one's own observations of language.

In Part II of the Language Inquiry, the respondents were asked to check the three items that they would most like to hear discussed and also the reasons for their selection. The statements chosen for discussion show an absence of many where a statistically significant difference exists between responses of the linguists and responses in the different groups. Again the situation may reveal an overconfidence in dealing with the familiar. It is true, too, that without knowledge to start with and consequently often without an interest, individuals are not likely to be aware. I believe that Thomasin made this point, although perhaps indirectly.

However, the results are not all discouraging. A number of respondents showed an interest in talking about this statement: The child's development in the use of language during the pre-school years provides clues for methods to be used in the English classroom. I am sure that Thomasin would have participated eagerly in this discussion. Another result that I found encouraging came from the comparatively strong acceptance by all groups of the statement: The process of learning a language differs from the process of learning historical facts. The problem here, though, is to find illustrations of the idea put into practice. Thomasin's comments about teaching language were pointed in this direction, but in my experience, she was unusual in her awareness.

Why bother about language attitudes in teacher education? There are important reasons. It makes us as people in English Education more conscious of what our students are thinking, and this kind of consciousness is the beginning of teaching. It helps us know where to start, how to evaluate our own plans, and how to modify the curriculum in the preparation of teachers. We know that in many colleges, the language and composition requirements for prospective English teachers have been increased in recent years. Do we simply add courses and sit back? Since there are only so many credit hours available, should not the requirements be constantly evaluated in terms of what language background is of most worth to the secondary school teacher of English? Is the college student in his preparation to teach English stimulated to think and observe -- in relation to his own language environment? To what extent is he given background information about the problems of usage that he will meet as a teacher? (Is this simply left to chance?) Who guides the student in his thinking about and observing the varieties of English? How comprehensive are the required language courses -- what different aspects of language are included? Should not linguists, junior-senior high school

English teachers, and college teachers concerned with English Education more often study together the kind of preparation needed by the teacher of the English language? Why not invite psychologists and sociologists who are interested in language development in the individual? There is a job to be done, but first there is a job to be analyzed.

Ellen A. Frogner
Emeritus
Southern Illinois University